

Customs Officer interview questions

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What to expect

Customs Officer interviews are run by panels from the Australian Border Force or Department of Home Affairs and combine procedural knowledge with judgement testing. Expect questions on how you apply legislation in practice, how you behave under pressure with the public, and how you handle integrity risks that come with access to sensitive intelligence and enforcement powers.

- **Process:** Walk-through questions checking you know the correct sequence for inspection, classification and escalation, and where discretion ends and procedure takes over.
- **Behavioural:** Past-experience questions probing attention to detail, honesty under pressure and how you have handled non-compliance you personally identified.
- **Scenario:** Judgement questions involving agitated travellers, ambiguous declarations or conflicting information, testing how you balance procedure against context.
- **Technical:** Questions on tariff classification, duty calculation and use of systems like ASYCUDA or the integrated cargo system.
- **Integrity and safety:** Questions about corruption resistance, confidentiality and safe handling of prohibited or dangerous items, reflecting the enforcement and security dimension of the role.

Interviews usually open with general suitability and motivation questions, move into scenario and behavioural questions that make up the bulk of the assessment, then close with technical or systems questions. Many recruitment processes also run a separate integrity check, psychometric testing and a medical or fitness assessment alongside the panel interview.

1. Walk me through how you would handle a cargo consignment that has been flagged as high risk by the manifest system.

Why they ask

Tests whether you understand the practical inspection sequence and when to escalate rather than clear goods yourself.

How to structure your answer

Answer as a step-by-step process walk-through: initial checks, physical or scanning inspection, decision points, and who you involve at each stage.

Example answer

"First I'd pull the manifest and any prior history on the importer or consignee to understand why the shipment was flagged. Then I'd arrange physical inspection or X-ray scanning depending on the goods and risk indicators. If the scan shows anomalies or the paperwork doesn't match the physical count, I don't clear it myself. I document what I've found, note the discrepancy against the declared tariff classification, and refer it to a senior officer or the relevant investigation unit for secondary examination. Every step gets recorded so there's a clear evidentiary trail if it ends up going further."

2. Tell me about a time you identified a compliance issue that others had missed.

Why they ask

Checks genuine attention to detail and whether you follow through on a finding rather than letting it slide.

How to structure your answer

Use STAR: situation, task, action, result.

Example answer

"During a routine cargo check, I noticed the declared tariff code didn't match the product description on the packing list, though it had passed an earlier check. My task was to confirm whether this was an error or deliberate misclassification. I cross-referenced the classification rules, contacted the importer's agent for clarification, and found the goods had been deliberately coded under a lower duty category. I escalated it with full documentation, and the shipment was reassessed and the correct duty applied. It reinforced for me that a clean-looking manifest still needs to be checked against the actual goods."

3. A traveller becomes agitated and raises their voice when you ask follow-up questions about their declaration. How do you handle it?

Why they ask

Assesses composure and public-facing judgement in a role where officers hold enforcement power over frustrated members of the public.

How to structure your answer

Frame as a judgement-under-pressure response: immediate de-escalation action, procedural safeguard, and outcome you're aiming for.

Example answer

"I'd keep my tone level and slow the interaction down rather than matching their energy. I'd explain plainly why I'm asking the questions and what happens next, since a lot of frustration comes from not knowing the process. If they stay agitated, I'd involve a colleague or supervisor for support rather than push the interview alone. My aim is to get an accurate declaration and keep the situation controlled, not to win an argument. If there are genuine grounds for further examination, I proceed with that regardless of how the conversation went, but I always keep it professional and documented."

4. How would you calculate duty payable on a shipment containing multiple product types with different tariff classifications?

Why they ask

Direct technical check on classification and valuation skills central to the role.

How to structure your answer

Answer as a technical explanation: outline the method and the reference material you'd use, then give a worked example of your reasoning.

Example answer

"I'd separate the shipment by product line first, since each item needs its own tariff classification rather than one blanket code. For each line, I'd check the customs tariff schedule to confirm the correct heading and rate, then apply the appropriate valuation method, usually transaction value, to work out the dutiable amount. I'd also check for any concessions or free trade agreement rates that might apply before finalising the calculation. If a classification is ambiguous, I'd flag it for a formal ruling rather than guess, because getting it wrong either under-collects revenue or unfairly delays legitimate goods."

5. Describe a time you had to decide whether to strictly enforce a rule or consider the context an importer or traveller gave you.

Why they ask

Probes how you balance procedural rigidity with fair judgement, a recurring tension in compliance-heavy roles.

How to structure your answer

Use STAR, but emphasise the reasoning behind the final decision rather than just the outcome.

Example answer

"A traveller had exceeded the duty-free allowance on goods and explained it was an honest oversight rather than an attempt to evade duty. My task was to decide whether the explanation changed how I proceeded. I still applied the duty owed, because the rule doesn't turn on intent, but I explained clearly why the assessment applied and didn't escalate it as a deliberate evasion case given there was no pattern of prior issues and no attempt to conceal the goods. The result was the traveller paid the correct duty and left with a clear understanding of the rule, and I recorded the interaction accurately without inflating it into something it wasn't."

6. This role gives you access to sensitive intelligence and enforcement powers. How do you protect against corruption risk or being compromised?

Why they ask

Direct integrity question reflecting the security and confidentiality demands of border enforcement work.

How to structure your answer

Answer as a values-based explanation: state your principle, then give a concrete practice that demonstrates it.

Example answer

"I treat every piece of information I access as something I'm accountable for, not something I own. In practice that means I only access records relevant to the task in front of me, I report any approach or offer that feels like an attempt to influence a decision, and I keep my personal relationships separate from casework, especially with importers or agents I deal with regularly. I'd rather flag a situation that turns out to be nothing than stay quiet about something that could compromise the integrity of a case or the border itself."